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JANUARY 2011

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Swiss Kit

There aren't many hi-fi separates that hail from Switzerland, and those that do are generally expensive, esoteric designs – just like Dartzeel's huge CTH-8550 integrated. David Price enjoys the sound of music...



Whilst I'm sure many readers imagine the editor of this magazine is permanently languishing in a state of high end bliss,

impossibly expensive bits of kit stacking up from one end of the listening room, it's not *quite* like that. Until recently I'd been relying on my old Marantz CD273 (1984, bought on eBay for £22) as a digital source, for example; the trouble is that manufacturers have an annoying habit of wanting their stuff back, whether I'm ready or not! Happily I'm well served with amplifiers though, with a Musical Fidelity AMS35i on loan along with my gorgeous World Audio Design K5881 'Andy Grove Signature' valve power amp bought and paid for! So how then, I mused, would the visit of a £16,500 Dartzeel fit in with an already very good thank-you-very-much amplifying team? What could it possibly bring to a system already well served with serious sounding power houses?

The first thing you notice about the Dartzeel is its sheer physical size (440 x 335 x 170) and back-breaking 29kg weight. It's an impressive bit of kit alright, with a striking gold anodised 15mm aluminium fascia and red painted hammer finished 2mm thick Swedish grade steel casework. The four grab handles; one at each corner; seem a stylistic contrivance but soon prove essential when shifting it! It's very well built, although it doesn't have the silkiness of Japanese products; it feels more like rugged military communications hardware than a soft, silky slice of domestic high end, somehow

reminding me of my old BMW F650 motorbike with its Austrian army spec Rotax Type 804 engine. When the bomb drops, I dare say that only cockroaches and Dartzeels will survive...

The CTH-8550 features newly designed power output stages which include onboard regulated power supplies for a compact global layout, Dartzeel says, while the signal path has been carefully kept as simple as possible. The use of two paralleled output transistor pairs was chosen for hassle-free setup, whatever the kind of speaker used, the company says. The additional power gain provided by these two output pairs allowed them to reduce the number of silicon junctions in driver stages. So there are now only three in the power section, resulting in a claimed 220 Watts per channel under 8 Ohms [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE].

All regulated power supplies involved in the analogue section are located on the audio circuits, ensuring best possible ripple rejection and low noise floor, the company claim. All DC drift is compensated by digital means, allowing the compensation to be completely kept outside of the signal path, it is said. A huge toroidal power transformer feeds the dual mono power amp sections, while a second, smaller transformer caters for the low level signal. Optional phono sections (£1,000 MC, £650 MM) are implemented on same circuits for very short signal paths from the input RCA connectors; these are a factory upgrade.

The amp sports nine inputs,

accessed by a row of buttons under a fluorescent dot-matrix display. There's a record output (thumbs up!) with independent record source selection, and all switching can be done via the beautiful bespoke alloy cased full featured remote control. The central volume knob is curiously labelled the 'Pleasure Control', and is custom-made by Elma; the control electronics are said to use high quality semiconductor devices for best reproduction accuracy. Oh the Swiss!

Very quirky then, but it does work well and the whole amplifier certainly feels special to use, albeit it not in the sense of being transcendently smooth to operate and gorgeous to the touch, as with some Japanese high end. Each CTH-8550 is delivered with its own dedicated USB key which contains all customer information including the owner's name, the serial number and the firmware; I'm surprised there's not a remote control alarm with flashing light in the dashboard!

SOUND QUALITY

I don't know if it's some covert puritanical streak in me, but I immediately took against this amplifier when I found out its vast price. Sure, it's an interesting and almost charming thing to look at and to use, but can one *really* justify the princely sum of £16,500 for a largish integrated amplifier? On switch on, and several hours thereafter, my verdict was a firm *no*. I was in no doubt that the Dartzeel, lovely object that it was, was almost sadistically overpriced, such were the sounds issuing forth from my Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers.

dartzeel

integrated amplifier



More
 Mono
 Time
 Light
 Name
 Male
 Micro
 Balance

Power



They were telling me that it's a powerful transistor amplifier, a bit opaque across the midband and constrained in soundstaging terms, which almost sounds less powerful than it really is. I cued up an original pressing of Sade's 'Diamond Life' on CD and sat down to a rather forced, harsh presentation of 'Smooth Operator', the Dartzeel sounding quite lacklustre. But then something strange happened, and as the album progressed, I began to find myself rather enjoying it. No longer pinned to my sofa with the harshness of the midband, the soundstage seemed to be expanding in all directions and Ms Adu seemed no longer to have a voice that sounded like she'd been on the fags the night before. The Dartzeel began coming alive before my ears in a way I've not heard as markedly before.

By the time we'd reached Sade's cover of 'Why Can't We Live Together', my system was singing in a way that had me on edge of the sofa for a different reason. I'd really hit the loud pedal (sorry 'pleasure control'), and whereas every other transistor integrated I've heard in this system has begun to sound strained in such a predicament, the Dartzeel almost seemed to be relaxing in to the job of making my bass drivers take major excursions forward and backward in time to the beat. Yes, it had been a

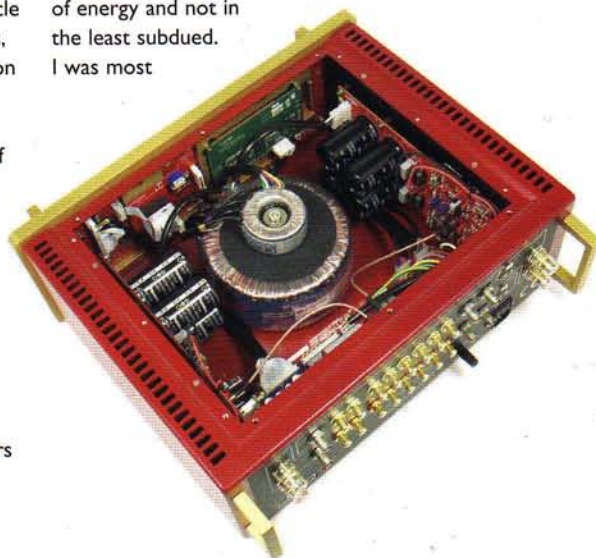
little edgy but it was getting creamier by the minute and the more the song emoted (and the dynamics peaked), the more this amplifier seemed to relish it. There wasn't a hint of stress, the CTH-8550 apparently completely unflustered and happy to spotlight dynamic peaks that almost every other integrated I've heard sits on. I can truthfully say I heard 'Diamond Life' in a way I've not before, and I've played it more than a few times since 1984!

On to more contemporary fare, and Mark Ronson's 'Bang Bang Bang', and I was now struck by just how deep and dimensional the Dartzeel was sounding. This is hardly a pinnacle of the pop album art in sonic terms, but the big Swiss amp didn't dwell on the weaknesses and instead chose to major on the track's deep, dark bass, thumping out massive tracts of low frequencies like it was going out of fashion. Excellent as my £6,000 Musical Fidelity '35i is, the Dartzeel showed what was possible with solid-state devices, sounding both tonally richer and far more commanding, especially at volumes; there was just no fear for the Yamaha's extra large pizza sized bass bins, which have most amplifiers doing a passable impression of an asthmatic ant trying to blow up a damp paper bag.

Along with a rock solid bottom,

transient peaks didn't knock the Dartzeel off its stride; it timed with metronomic precision (I'll avoid the Swiss watch analogy) where most other solid-staters seem closer to a worn out cuckoo clock.

Given its time to warm up (about two hours, all told), then tonally the Dartzeel proved unexpectedly rich – sumptuous even. Indeed it's richer sounding than some KT88-based valve amplifiers; if it glowed in the dark it would have 300Bs sprouting out of it like moss on a Morris Minor Traveller side window. It's quite dark and velvety, but yet somehow looped hi hats proved full of energy and not in the least subdued. I was most





impressed by its tonal palette too; here's an amplifier that lets you hear the instrument (or sample's) original harmonic signature, rather than sucking out the colour or adding too much flavouring of its own. This is one of only a few solid-state amplifiers I've heard that take you to a completely different world when you switch discs; from early eighties Power Plant with 'Diamond Life' to Dunham Studios, Brooklyn, last year, different recordings come with a totally different flavour, just as they should.

Moving from Q-Tip's recent rapping on Mark Ronson to his contribution to Stanley Clarke's '1, 2, To the Bass', back in 2003, and the

Dartzee was allowed to fly.

This album's production values are superb, rendering crystal clear the contribution of Joe Satriani on guitar; I heard dazzling speed allied to wonderful rhythmic dexterity and a delightful warmth and graunch to his instrument.

Behind this we had Stanley Clarke's sublime bass

guitar and keyboard work and a pounding drum machine, making for a mesmerising track that fuses jazz and rap in a fulfilling way. The following 'Simply Said' is a more traditional acoustic track, which the Dartzee carried with delicacy; oboes had a woody quality to them but didn't grate, the acoustic drum kit was a delight with a fantastically tight snare sound and smooth and crisp treble, and the bass guitar sounded supple and insistent, yet not overpowering.

Overall, this amp delivered an engrossing performance, being both delicate and effortlessly powerful at the same time. As before, if anything it was just a touch on the dark side tonally, yet had a speed and incision and bite that could only come from an amplifier of great transparency.

Moving to beautifully recorded classical piano music, and Gottlieb Wallisch's debut on Linn Records, 'Mozart in Vienna', 'Sonata in D major, K.576 - I Allegro' rang through into my listening room like bells in the night. As you'd expect of this label, recording quality was beyond reproach, letting the Dartzee do its stuff. The result was an admirably wide recorded acoustic, with commendable depth too, and an accuracy of imaging such that the concert hall's boundaries seemed as real as those of one's own listening room. The piano was sparkling with harmonics, about as good as it's possible to get from Compact Disc at least, and yet there was a tremendous delicacy to the playing too; rhythmically this amplifier proved superb. Once again, at high levels it showed absolutely no sign whatsoever of stress, it was as if it had barely noticed the immense spread of sound it was producing in the room. Those with large listening rooms will want to try this amplifier cranked up with its foot to the floor!

It's normally at this point that I add my caveats, but if you remember this is a high power solid state device and not a 3V parallel single ended tube amplifier, then it's actually very hard to fault. You will find slightly sweeter, and/or more incisive designs around, but you'll pay the price for them in either a concomitant lack of power or ear-achingly unpleasant tonality. The Dartzee simply does so much so very well, and yet is more than the sum of its competencies; it has something intrinsically very endearing all of its own which makes

it just plain nice to listen to music of any

type. It's rare that I say that about any amplifier, let alone a high power transistor one.

REFERENCE SYSTEM:

Sony CDP-X77ES/dCS Debussy DAC
Musical Fidelity AMS35i integrated amplifier
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

CONCLUSION

Perhaps I wouldn't be so effusive if I'd come to this review expecting this amplifier to be amazing. Frankly, I didn't, even though I did think it would be good. As it turned out, it is more than this; the Dartzee CTH-8550 is an excellent all rounder with a charm of its very own. Combining the intricate textural detail and velvety tonality of a fine tube amplifier, with a take no prisoners approach to supplying vast sums of power with grip and gusto, it makes for an interesting listen. Just be sure to partner it with excellent ancillaries - and warm it up thoroughly before taking the 'Pleasure Control' up too high.

It's hard to assess the value for money of something so crazily expensive as this, but if you're lucky enough to be contemplating such sums then frankly I don't think they'd be wasted on this amplifier.

VERDICT

Charismatic and quirky high end solid-state integrated amplifier with superb sound and a charming visage.

DARTZEE
CTH-8550 £16,500
Absolute Sounds
+44(0)208971 3909
www.absolutesounds.com

- FOR**
- neutrality, insight
 - fine tonality and texturing
 - engaging musicality
 - soundstaging

- AGAINST**
- styling not to all tastes?
 - price!

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Dartzee CTH-8550 is massively powerful, producing 210 Watts into 8 Ohms and a massive 361 Watts into 4 Ohms. Powers like this are for playing very loud in large rooms and it takes a big loudspeaker to absorb such power without damage, so the Dartzee is aimed at ambitious setups, or it must be (under)used carefully. Distortion levels remain low and second harmonic predominated at all frequencies and levels, even up to full output, so the roughness of crossover distortion has been avoided and the CTH-8550 should sound smooth in its treble. Damping factor was surprisingly low at 16, much like that of a Naim amplifier, and bass may well sound a little larger as a result.

Input sensitivity is adjustable and reached a maximum of 160mV via the unbalanced line inputs, and 330mV via the balanced input.

The phono stage was adjusted for MC use in our amplifier and had a high sensitivity of 0.3mV maximum, making the amplifier able to cope with low output designs. The overload ceiling was high at 14mV so overload will not occur. Frequency response was flat from 5Hz up to 32kHz (-1dB) and equalisation accuracy across this band good, with just a mild treble lift of +0.5dB from the 75µS curve. Gain was maintained down to 5Hz so disc warps

will be amplified; there is no warp filter. Hiss was low at -68dB.

The Dartzee is very powerful and well engineered all round. It is likely to deliver good sonic results. NK

Power	210 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	3Hz-71kHz
Separation	88dB
Noise	-89dB
Distortion	0.13%
Sensitivity	160mV
Disc	
Frequency response	5Hz-32kHz
Separation	63dB
Noise	-68dB
Distortion	0.08%
Sensitivity	0.3mV
Overload	14mV

DISTORTION

